

# The New York Times

## A Reason to Drill in the Gulf

*Editorial*

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It is time to make a serious effort to save the vanishing wetlands and barrier islands along the coast of Louisiana. The best chance is a bill passed by the Senate that would guarantee Louisiana and three other coastal states a share of oil and gas revenues from drilling in the Gulf of Mexico. The states would be expected to use the proceeds largely for coastal restoration and related projects. The House should adopt this measure in its present form during the coming lame-duck session, and President Bush should sign it.

Since the deluge of Hurricane Katrina anniversary coverage in August, there has been very little talk about the safety of New Orleans and the surrounding region. In fact, the city and the region are more vulnerable than ever.

Even before last year's storms, the wetlands and barrier islands that provide a protective buffer were eroding at a rate of 25 square miles a year — the result of a half-century of calamitous mismanagement of Mississippi River water flows. Katrina and Rita together snatched away another 217 square miles. Levees, of course, are necessary to protect New Orleans and other low-lying areas, but they are only the final line of defense. Healthy wetlands are essential to any long-term plan.

The Senate bill — whose principal architect is Mary Landrieu, a Louisiana Democrat — would open up 8.3 million acres of the Gulf of Mexico to new oil and gas development. Half the royalties would go to the federal treasury, 37.5 percent would go to the four coastal states, and the rest would go into a fund to help other states purchase open space.

Our support for this bill should not be taken as a blanket endorsement of offshore drilling — nor

as an endorsement of a mischievous bill sponsored by Representative Richard Pombo, Republican of California, and passed by the House last summer. The Pombo bill would end a longstanding federal moratorium on oil and gas drilling on the entire American coastline. The Landrieu bill would simply enlarge the drilling area in the gulf, where oil and gas exploration has been broadly accepted for years.

Mr. Pombo is hoping that the Senate will agree to a conference committee in which the two bills can be married. But his bill is so poorly thought out as to be unacceptable, even as a starting point for compromise. A conference committee would also leave the protection of America's coastal waters to the mercy of closed-door horse trading.

Ms. Landrieu opposes any such compromise and so, to his credit, does the Senate majority leader, Bill Frist. They are hoping to persuade the House to accept and approve Ms. Landrieu's narrower bill before the present Congress comes to an end.

Is this an impossible objective?

Not if sensible people in the House think carefully about it. The Landrieu bill targets an immediate need. The House should not see it as a rival to Mr. Pombo's bill — which has no chance of passing the Senate — or, for that matter, as primarily an energy bill. The House should instead see it as a way to restore the health of a battered ecosystem, as future protection for the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people, and as a way to deliver on unfulfilled promises.